

Background

Overseas Schools When American parents live and work outside the United States, their children often attend American schools overseas. At most of these schools, students are taught in English and study many of the things that students study in the U.S. International schools, like the one described in this selection, are located all over the world.

Connecting to the Literature

Reading/Writing Connection Jean Fritz, the author of "MK," was the child of American missionaries, people who do religious work in a foreign land. Because of her parents' work, Jean went to school in China until the seventh grade. Describe the possible differences between growing up in another country and growing up in the United States. Use at least three of these words: *discover, explore, imitate, observe.*

Meet the Author

Jean Fritz (b. 1915)



Missionary Kid An only child of missionary parents, Jean Fritz grew up in China. Although she had not yet been in the United States, she read and heard from her father about American heroes, such as George Washington and Teddy Roosevelt. Her fascination with these heroes inspired her career as a writer of American history.

Fast Facts

- ▶ As a child, Fritz kept a journal to help her feel less lonely.
- ▶ As an adult, she wrote an autobiography, called *Homesick*.
- ▶ Fritz fills her biographies with unusual but true details about her subjects, which she researches thoroughly. "History is full of gossip; it's real people and emotion," she says. The details make her books about historical figures such as Pocahontas or Sam Adams come alive.

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mk

Jean Fritz

I suspect for most of us MKs¹ China not only sharpened our sense of time but our sense of place. We always knew where we were in relation to the rest of the world. And we noticed. Perhaps because we knew we would be leaving China sometime (we wouldn't be MKs or even Ks forever), we developed the habit of observing our surroundings with care. We have strong memories, which explains why as an adult, walking along a beach in Maine, I suddenly found myself on the verge of tears. In front of me, pushing up from the crevice of a rock, was a wild bluebell² like the wild bluebells I had known in my summers at Kuling.³ Suddenly I was a child again. I was back in China, welcoming bluebells back in my life.

 Reading Check

As a child, where did the narrator live?

1. MKs (em' kāz') *n.* Missionary Kids; the children of missionaries.

2. bluebell (blū' bel') *n.* plant with blue, bell-shaped flowers.

3. Kuling (kū' līŋ) *n.* now called Lushan, a hill resort south of the Yangtze River in China.

For a long time it was hard for me to unscramble the strings that made up my quest. I have noticed, however, that those MKs who were born in China and stayed there through their high school years were more likely to commit their lives in some way to China. After finishing their higher education in the States, they would return to China as consuls, as teachers, as businessmen and women, as writers, as historians.

I wouldn't be staying through high school. My family planned to return to America when I had finished seventh grade, whether I was finished with China or not. Of course I knew I had to become an American, the sooner the better. So far away from America, I didn't feel like a real American. Nor would I, I thought, until I had put my feet down on American soil.

I had just finished sixth grade at the British School in Wuhan,⁴ so I would have one more year to go. Nothing would change that. I knew that there was fighting up and down the Yangtze River, but the Chinese were always fighting—warlord against warlord.⁵ That had nothing to do with me. But as soon as I saw the servant from next door racing toward our house with a message for my mother, I knew something was happening. Since we had no phone, we depended on our German neighbors for emergency messages. My father had called, the servant explained. All American women and children had to catch the afternoon boat to Shanghai.⁶ The army, which had done so much damage to Nanjing (just down the river), was on its way here.

As I helped my mother pack, my knees were shaking. I had only felt this once before. My mother and I had been in a ricksha on the way to the racecourse when farmers ran to the road, calling hateful words at us and throwing stones.

4. **Wuhan** (wŭhān' hān') *n.* city in the central part of China, near the Yangtze River.

5. **warlord** (wŭr' lôrd') *n.* local leader.

6. **Shanghai** (shān' hī') *n.* seaport in E. China.

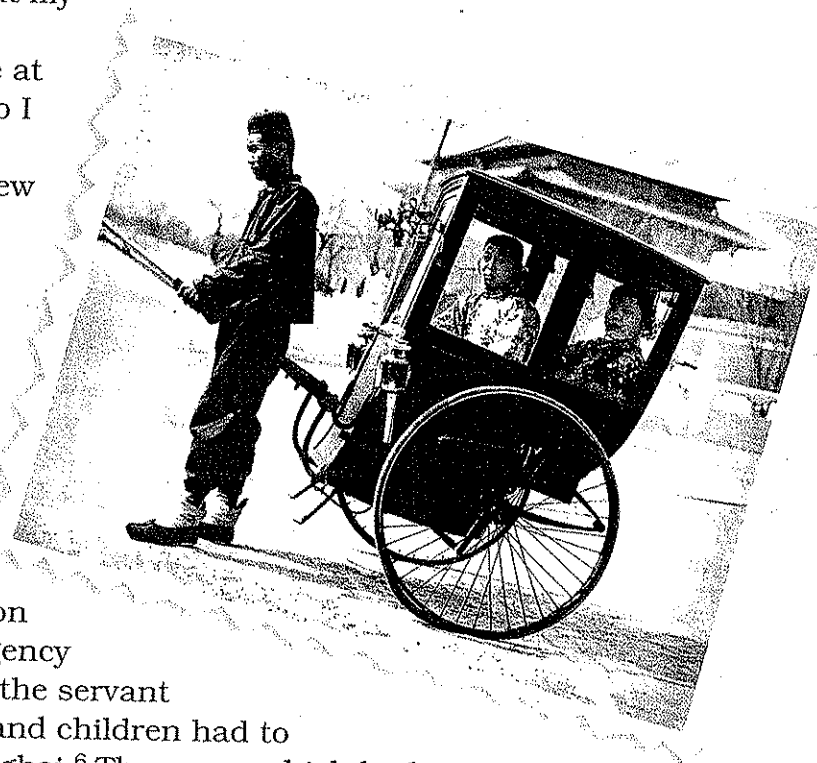
Reading Skill

Context Clues

Identify examples in this paragraph that help you define *commit*.

Vocabulary Builder

quest (kwest) *n.* a long search for something



▲ Critical Viewing

Does a ricksha offer much protection to the riders?

[Speculate]

The ricksha-pullers were fast runners, so we weren't hurt, but I told myself this was like Stephen in the Bible who was stoned to death. He just didn't have a ricksha handy. By the time we reached the boat that afternoon, my knees were normal. So was I. And I knew what our plans were. My father and other American men would work in the daytime, but for safety at night they would board one of the gunboats anchored in the river. The women and children going to Shanghai would be protected from bullets by steel barriers erected around the deck. And when we reached Shanghai, then what? I asked my mother.

We would be staying with the Barretts, another missionary family, who had one son, Fletcher, who was two years younger than I and generally unlikable. Mr. Barrett met us in Shanghai and drove us to their home, where his wife was on the front porch. My mother greeted her warmly but I just held out my hand and said, "Hello, Mrs. Barrett," which I thought was adequate. She raised her eyebrows. "Have you become so grown up, Jean," she said, "that I'm no longer your 'Auntie Barrett'?"

I didn't say that I'd always been too grown up for the "auntie" business. I just smiled. In China all MKs called their parents' friends "auntie" or "uncle." Not me. Mrs. B. pushed Fletcher forward.

"Fletcher has been so excited about your visit, Jean," she said. "He has lots of games to show you. Now, run along, children."

Fletcher did have a lot of games. He decided what we'd play—rummy, then patience, while he talked a blue streak. I didn't pay much attention until, in the middle of an Uncle Wiggley game, he asked me a question.

"Have you ever been in love, Jean?" he asked.

What did he think I was? I was twelve years old, for heaven's sakes!

Ever since first grade I'd been in love with someone. The boys never knew it, of course.

Fletcher hadn't finished with love. "I'm in love now," he said. "I'll give you a hint. She's an MK."

"Naturally."

"And she's pretty." Then he suddenly shrieked out the answer as if he couldn't contain it a second longer. "It's you," he cried. "Y-O-U."

Vocabulary Builder

adequate (ad' i kwet)
adj. enough

Reading Skill

Context Clues

Which word restates the meaning of *shrieked* in the last paragraph?

Reading Check

Why is it necessary for Jean and her mother to travel to Shanghai?

Well, Fletcher Barrett was even dumber than I'd thought. No one had ever called me "pretty" before. Not even my parents. Besides, this conversation was making me sick. "I'm tired," I said. "I think I'll get my book and lie down."

At the last minute I had slipped my favorite book in my suitcase. It was one my father and I had read last year—*The Courtship of Miles Standish*⁷—all about the first settlers in America. I knew them pretty well now and often visited with Priscilla Alden.

Settled on the bed in the room I'd been told was mine, I opened the book and let the Pilgrims step off the Mayflower into Shanghai. Priscilla was one of the first.

"You're still a long way from Plymouth," I told her, "but you'll get there. Think you'll like it?"

"I know I will," she answered promptly. "Everything will be better there."

"How do you know?"

"It's a new country. It will be whatever we make it."

"It may be hard," I warned her.

"Maybe," she admitted. "But I'll never give up. Neither will John," she added.

I was being called for supper. I waited for the Pilgrims to get back on the Mayflower. Then I closed the book and went downstairs.

The days that followed, I spent mostly with Fletcher, whether I liked it or not.

Fletcher was fussing now that the summer was almost over and he'd have to go back to school soon.

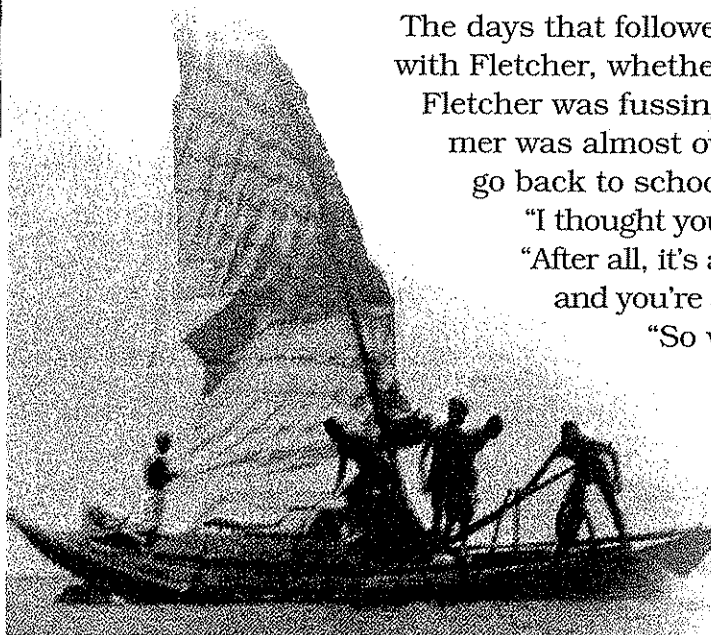
"I thought you'd like it," I said.

"After all, it's an American school and you're an American."

"So what?"

"Don't you feel like an American when you're in school?"

"What's there to feel?"



Literary Analysis
Narration What problems does reading help Jean solve?

◀ **Critical Viewing**
Jean probably saw boats like this on the Yangtze River. What purpose do you think a boat like this might serve? [**Hypothesize**]

7. *The Courtship of Miles Standish* n. narrative poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, written in 1858. One character is Priscilla Alden.

He was impossible. If he had gone to a British school, the way I had all my life, he might realize how lucky he was. The Shanghai American School was famous. Children from all over China were sent there to be boarders. Living in Shanghai, Fletcher was just a day student. But even so!

Then one day my mother got a letter from my father. The danger was mostly over, he thought, but some foreign businesses were not reopening. The British School had closed down. (Good news!)

The Yangtze River boats went back in service the next week, so my mother went downtown to buy our tickets back to Wuhan. Fletcher was back in school now, and as soon as he came home, he rushed to see me, his face full of news.

"Your mother is only buying one ticket," he informed me. "You're not going. You're going to the Shanghai American School as a boarder."

"My mother would never do that. You're crazy," I replied. "Where did you get such an idea?"

"I overheard our mothers talking. It's true, Jean."

"Yeah, like cows fly."

When my mother came back, I could see that she was upset. Fletcher did a disappearing act; I figured he didn't want to be caught in a lie.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Jean," my mother said, her eyes filling with tears. She put her arms around me. "Since the British School is closed," she said, "I've arranged for you to be a boarder at the American School. It won't be for long. We may even go back to America early. At least I'll know you're safe."

I knew my mother was worried that I'd be homesick, so I couldn't let on how I really felt. (Just think, I told myself, I'd have almost a year to practice being an American.) I buried my head on her shoulder. "I'll be okay," I said, sniffing back fake tears. Sometimes it's necessary to deceive your parents if you love them, and I did love mine.

After my mother left on the boat, Mr. Barrett took me to the Shanghai American School (SAS for short). I guess I expected some kind of immediate transformation. I always felt a tingling when I saw the American flag flying over the American consulate. Surely it would be more than a tingling now; surely it would overwhelm me. But when we went through the iron gates of the school grounds, I didn't feel a thing. On the football field a group of high school girls were practicing cheerleading. They were jumping,

Literary Analysis

Narration What world events affect the author of this nonfiction narrative?

Vocabulary Builder

deceive (dē sēv') v.
make someone believe something that is not true

transformation
(trans'fer mā'shən)
n. change

✓ Reading Check

Why is Jean excited about going to the American school?

standing on their hands, yelling rah, rah, rah. It just seemed like a lot of fuss about football. What was the matter with me?

The dormitory where I'd be living was divided in half by a swinging door. The high school girls were on one side of the door; the junior high (which included me) were on the other. On my side there were two Russian girls and two American MKs, the Johnson sisters, who had long hair braided and wound around their heads like Sunday school teachers. And there was Paula, my American roommate, who looked as though she belonged on the other side of the door. Hanging in our shared closet I noticed a black velvet dress. And a pair of high heeled shoes. She wore them to tea dances, she explained, when one of her brother's friends came to town. She was squinting her eyes as she looked at me, sizing up my straight hair and bangs.

"I happen to know you're an MK," she said, "but you don't have to look like one." The latest style in the States, she told me, was a boyish bob.⁸ She'd give me one, she decided.

So that night she put a towel around my shoulders and newspaper on the floor, and she began cutting. This might make all the difference, I thought, as I watched my hair travel to the floor.

It didn't. My ears might have felt more American, but not me. After being in hiding all their lives, my ears were suddenly outdoors, looking like jug handles on each side of my face. I'd get used to them, I told myself. Meanwhile I had to admit that SAS was a big improvement over the British School. Even without an American flag feeling, I enjoyed the months I was there.

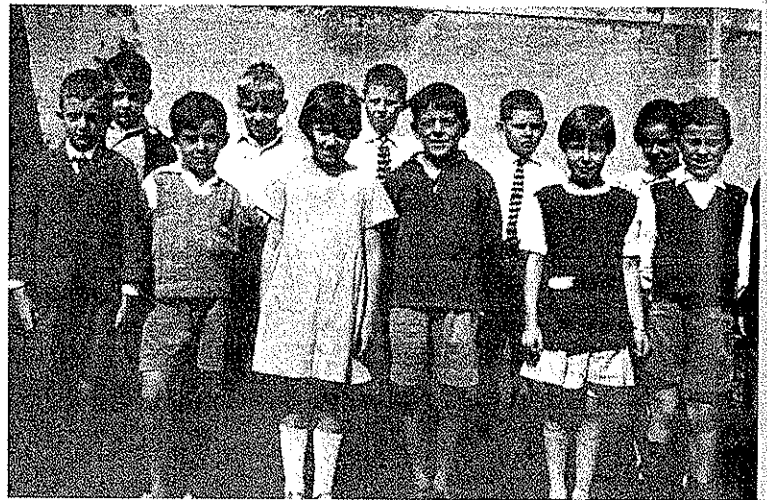
What I enjoyed most were the dances, except they weren't dances. There were too many MKs in the school, and the Ms didn't approve of dancing. Instead, we had "talk parties." The girls were given what looked like dance cards and the boys

8. bob (bāb) *n.* woman's or child's short haircut.

▼ Critical Viewing

In what ways do the children in this picture look similar to and different from children of today?

[Compare and Contrast]



Literary Analysis

Narration What is the first thing Jean's roommate decides to do for Jean?

were supposed to sign up for the talk sessions they wanted. Of course a girl could feel like a wallflower⁹ if her card wasn't filled up, but mine usually was. These parties gave me a chance to look over the boys in case I wanted to fall in love, and actually I was almost ready to make a choice when my parents suddenly appeared. It was early spring. Just as my mother had suspected, we were going to America early.

I knew that three weeks crossing the Pacific would be different from five days on the Yangtze but I didn't know how different. My father had given me a gray-and-green plaid steamer rug that I would put over me when I was lying on my long folding deck chair. At eleven o'clock every morning a waiter would come around with a cup of "beef tea." I loved the idea of drinking beef tea under my steamer rug but it didn't happen often. The captain said this was the roughest crossing he'd ever made, and passengers spent most of their time in their cabins. If they came out for a meal, they were lucky if they could get it down before it came back up again. I had my share of seasickness, so of course I was glad to reach San Francisco.

I couldn't wait to take my first steps on American soil, but I expected the American soil to hold still for me. Instead, it swayed as if we were all still at sea, and I lurched about as I had been doing for the last three weeks. I noticed my parents were having difficulty, too. "Our heads and our legs aren't ready for land," my father explained. "It takes a little while." We spent the night in a hotel and took a train the next day for Pittsburgh where our relatives were meeting us.

It was a three-day trip across most of the continent, but it didn't seem long. Every minute America was under us and rushing past our windows—the Rocky Mountains, the Mississippi river, flat ranch land, small towns, forests, boys dragging school bags over dusty roads. It was all of America at once splashed across where we were, where we'd been, where we were going. How could you not feel American? How could you not feel that you belonged? By the time we were settled at my grandmother's house, I felt as if I'd always been a part of this family. And wasn't it wonderful to have real aunts and uncles, a real grandmother, and yes, even a real bathroom, for heaven's sakes?

Literary Analysis
Narration Why is Jean excited about the end of the crossing?

 **Reading Check**

How does Jean feel about living in the United States?

9. **wallflower** (wôl' flou' er) *n.* person who stands against the wall and watches at a dance, due to shyness or lack of popularity.

I wanted to talk to Priscilla, so I took my book outside, and when I opened it, out tumbled the Pilgrims, Priscilla first. I smiled. Here we were, all of us in America together, and it didn't matter that we came from different times. We all knew that America was still an experiment and perhaps always would be. I was one of the ones who had to try to make the experiment work.

"You'll have disappointments," Priscilla said. "But it will help if you get to know Americans who have spent their lives working on the experiment."

I wasn't sure just what she meant, but I knew it was important. "I'll try," I said.

"Try!" Priscilla scoffed. "If you want to be a real American, you'll have to do more than that." Her voice was fading. Indeed, the Pilgrims themselves were growing faint. Soon they had all slipped away.

I learned about disappointment as soon as I went to school. Of course I was no longer an MK, but I was certainly a curiosity. I was the Kid from China. "Did you live in a mud hut?" one boy asked me. "Did you eat rats and dogs? Did you eat with sticks?"

I decided that American children were ignorant. Didn't their teachers teach them anything? After a while, as soon as anyone even mentioned China, I shut up. "What was the name of your hometown?" I was asked, but I never told. I couldn't bear to have my hometown laughed at.

"Not all American children are ignorant," my mother pointed out. "Just a few who ask dumb questions."

Even in high school, however, I often got the same questions. But now we were studying about the American

Reading Skill

Context Clues

Which clues in the paragraph help you to understand the meaning of *fading*?

Vocabulary Builder

ignorant (ig' nə rənt)

adj. not knowing facts or information



Revolution and George Washington. Of course I'd always known who Washington was, but knowing history and understanding it are two different things. I had never realized how much he had done to make America into America. No matter how much he was asked to do for his country, he did it, even though he could hardly wait to go back home and be a farmer again. Of course there were disappointments on the way; of course he became discouraged. "If I'd known what I was getting into," he said at the beginning of the Revolution, "I would have chosen to live in an Indian teepee all my life." He never took the easiest way. When he thought his work was over at the end of the Revolution, he agreed to work on the Constitution. When the country needed a president, he took the oath of office. When his term was over, he was persuaded to run once again. Everyone had confidence that as long as he was there, the new government would work.

Although Washington was the first, there were many more like him who were, as Priscilla would say, "real" Americans. As I went through college and read about them, I knew I wanted to write about them someday. I might not talk to them in the same way I talked to Priscilla, but I would try to make them as real as they were when they were alive.

I had the feeling that I was coming to the end of my quest. But not quite. One day when someone asked me where I was born, I found myself smiling. I was for the moment standing beside the Yangtze River. "My hometown," I said, "was Wuhan, China." I discovered that I had to take China with me wherever I went.

Literary Analysis

Narration What does Jean learn in high school that she had not understood before then?

▼ Critical Viewing

How does this landscape of the United States compare with Jean's descriptions of where she lived in China? [**Compare and Contrast**]

Apply the Skills

MK

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** What questions do you have about the narrative? Write them in the first column of a three-column chart. Trade charts with a partner.
 - In the second column, answer your partner's questions. Discuss your responses.
 - In the third column, explain how the discussion affected your understanding of the work.
2. (a) **Recall:** Why do Jean and her mother travel to Shanghai? (b) **Infer:** Does the American School in Shanghai live up to Jean's expectations? Why or why not?
3. (a) **Recall:** What is Jean's favorite book? (b) **Interpret:** Why do you think Jean relates to the main character, Priscilla Alden?
4. **Take a Position:** What are the pros and cons of living outside the United States? Choose a position and support your answer.

Reading Skill

5. In a chart like this, write the italicized word in the left column. Then, write the **context clues** from the passage and decide what the word means. Check your response in a dictionary.

(a) I always felt a tingling when I saw the American flag flying over the American consulate. Surely it would be more than a tingling now; surely it would *overwhelm* me. (b) I expected the American soil to hold still for me. Instead, it *swayed* as if we were all still at sea.

Unfamiliar Word	Context Clues	Possible Meaning

Literary Analysis

6. Identify the main reason that "MK" is classified as a **narrative**.
7. The order, or sequence, of events is important in any type of **narration**. (a) What is the first thing Jean sees as she goes through the iron gates of the Shanghai American School? (b) Why is this information important to the story?

QuickReview

Story at a Glance

Jean Fritz describes some of her experiences growing up as a missionary kid in China.

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Context: the words and phrases surrounding a word. Context clues can help clarify an unfamiliar word.

Narrative Writing: any type of writing that tells a story